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Mourning and Remembrance

The pope believed that "history" is His-story--the story of God's quest for man.

By George Weigel

He once described his high-school years as a time in which he was "completely absorbed" by a passion for the theater. So it was fitting that Karol Jozef Wojtyla lived a very dramatic life. As a young man, he risked summary execution by leading clandestine acts of cultural resistance to the Nazi occupation of Poland. As a fledgling priest, he adopted a Stalin-era *nom de guerre*--Wujek, "uncle"--while creating zones of intellectual and spiritual freedom for college students; those students, now older men and women themselves, called him Wujek to the end. As archbishop of Krakow, he successfully fought the attempt by Poland's communist overseers to erase the nation's cultural memory. As Pope John Paul II, he came back to Poland in June 1979; and over nine days during which the history of the 20th century pivoted, he ignited a revolution of conscience that helped make possible the collapse of European communism a decade later.

Evangelical Witness

The world will remember the drama of this life in the days ahead, even as it measures John Paul II's many other accomplishments: his transformation of the papacy from a managerial office to one of evangelical witness; his voluminous teaching, touching virtually every aspect of contemporary life; his dogged pursuit of Christian unity; his success in blocking the Clinton administration's efforts to have abortion-on-demand declared a basic human right; his remarkable magnetism for young people; his groundbreaking initiatives with Judaism; his robust defense of religious freedom as the first of human rights.

And, in the remembering, certain unforgettable images will come to mind: the young Pope bouncing infants in the air and the old Pope bowed in remembrance over the memorial flame at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial; the Pope wearing a Kenyan tribal chieftain's feathered crown, the Pope waving his papal cross in defiance of Sandinista demonstrators in Managua, the Pope skiing, the Pope lost in prayer in countless venues; the Pope kneeling at the grave of murdered Solidarity chaplain Jerzy Popieluszko, the Pope slumped in pain in the Popemobile, seconds after taking two shots from a 9mm semi-automatic--and the Pope counseling and encouraging the would-be assassin in his Roman prison cell.

Some will dismiss him as hopelessly "conservative" in matters of doctrine and morals, although it is not clear how religious and moral truth can be parsed in liberal/conservative terms. The shadows cast upon his papacy by clerical scandal and the misgovernance of some bishops will focus others' attention. John Paul II was the most visible human being in history, having been seen live by more men and women than any other man who ever

lived; the remarkable thing is that millions of those people, who saw him only at a great distance, will think they have lost a friend. Those who knew him more intimately experience today a profound sense of personal loss at the death of a man who was so wonderfully, thoroughly, engagingly human--a man of intelligence and wit and courage whose humanity breathed integrity and sanctity.

So there are many ways of remembering and mourning him. Pope John Paul II should also be remembered, however, as a man with a penetrating insight into the currents that flow beneath the surface of history, currents that in fact create history, often in surprising ways.

In a 1968 letter to the French Jesuit theologian, Henri de Lubac, then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla suggested that "a degradation, indeed a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person" was at the root of the 20th century's grim record: two World Wars, Auschwitz and the Gulag, a Cold War threatening global disaster, oceans of blood and mountains of corpses. How had a century begun with such high hopes for the human future produced mankind's greatest catastrophes? Because, Karol Wojtyla proposed, Western humanism had gone off the rails, collapsing into forms of self-absorption, and then self-doubt, so severe that men and women had begun to wonder whether there was any truth at all to be found in the world, or in themselves.

This profound crisis of culture, this crisis in the very *idea* of the human, had manifested itself in the serial crises that had marched across the surface of contemporary history, leaving carnage in their wake. But unlike some truly "conservative" critics of late modernity, Wojtyla's counter-proposal was not rollback: rather, it was a truer, nobler humanism, built on the foundation of the biblical conviction that God had made the human creature in His image and likeness, with intelligence and free will, a creature capable of knowing the good and freely choosing it. That, John Paul II insisted in a vast number of variations on one great theme, was the true measure of man--the human capacity, in cooperation with God's grace, for heroic virtue.

Here was an idea with consequences, and the Pope applied it to effect across a broad spectrum of issues.

One variant form of debased humanism was the notion that "history" is driven by the politics of willfulness (the Jacobin heresy) or by economics (the Marxist heresy). During his epic pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979, at a moment when "history" seemed frozen and Europe permanently divided into hostile camps, John Paul II demonstrated that "history" worked differently, because human beings aren't just the by-products of politics or economics. He gave back to his people their authentic history and culture--their identity; and in doing so, he gave them tools of resistance that communist truncheons could not reach. Fourteen months after teaching that great lesson in dignity, the Pope watched and guided the emergence of Solidarity. And then the entire world began to see the communist tide recede, like the slow retreat of a plague.

After the Cold War, when more than a few analysts and politicians were in a state of barely restrained euphoria, imagining a golden age of inevitable progress for the cause of political and economic freedom, John Paul II saw more deeply and clearly. He quickly decoded new threats to what he had called, in that 1968 letter to Father de Lubac, the "inviolable mystery of the human person," and so he spent much of the 1990s explaining that freedom untethered from moral truth risks self-destruction.

For if there is only your truth and my truth and neither one of us recognizes a transcendent moral standard (call it "*the* truth") by which to settle our differences, then either you will impose your power on me or I will impose my power on you; Nietszche, great, mad prophet of the 20th century, got at least *that* right. Freedom uncoupled from truth, John Paul taught, leads to chaos and thence to new forms of tyranny. For, in the face of chaos (or fear), raw power will inexorably replace persuasion, compromise, and agreement as the coin of the political realm. The false humanism of freedom misconstrued as "I did it *my* way" inevitably leads to freedom's decay, and then to freedom's self-cannibalization. This was not the soured warning of an antimodern scold; this was the sage counsel of a man who had given his life to freedom's cause from 1939 on.

Thus the key to the freedom project in the 21st century, John Paul urged, lay in the realm of culture: in vibrant public moral cultures capable of disciplining and directing the tremendous energies--economic, political, aesthetic, and, yes, sexual--set loose in free societies. A vibrant public moral culture is essential for democracy and the market, for only such a culture can inculcate and affirm the virtues necessary to make freedom work. Democracy and the free economy, he taught in his 1991 encyclical Centesimus Annus, are goods; but they are not machines that can cheerfully run by themselves. Building the free society certainly involves getting the institutions right; beyond that, however, freedom's future depends on men and women of virtue, capable of knowing, and choosing, the genuinely good.

Future of Freedom

That is why John Paul relentlessly preached genuine tolerance: not the tolerance of indifference, as if differences over the good didn't matter, but the real tolerance of differences engaged, explored, and debated within the bond of a profound respect for the humanity of the other. Many were puzzled that this Pope, so vigorous in defending the truths of Catholic faith, could become, over a quarter-century, the world's premier icon of religious freedom and inter-religious civility. But here, too, John Paul II was teaching a crucial lesson about the future of freedom: Universal empathy comes through, not around, particular convictions. There is no Rawlsian veil of ignorance behind which the world can withdraw, to subsequently emerge with decency in its pocket.

There is only history. But that history, the Pope believed, is the story of God's quest for man, and man then taking the same path as God. "History" is His-story. Believing that, Karol Józef Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, changed history. The power of his belief empowered millions of others to do the same.

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